

**Post Card Party # 254 December 1, 2022**

 **December is no time to stop writing.**

While many voters take a mental break between election day and the new year, lame-duck sessions can actually provide some of the best opportunities for legislatures to pass bills they fought over before the elections. Here is an excerpt on that topic from the Nov. 28 Washington Post:

### What’s a lame-duck session and what is Congress planning for it?

A lame-duck session of Congress started today. But what does that mean? **A lame-duck session is the period during which a new Congress has been elected but the members haven’t yet been sworn in, so the old Congress is still governing.** It takes place between the November elections and when the new Congress starts in January.

Democrats will retain slim control of the Senate. But because Republicans take the House majority in January, Democrats are using the lame-duck period to try to accomplish legislative priorities. And they have a lot on their to-do list.

**But first:** Congress has an important (though routine) job to do before government funding runs out on Dec. 16. It needs to pass a spending bill to keep the government open. And there’s a second must-pass item: the annual military funding bill, which lawmakers are way behind on addressing. Lawmakers could also address a few other funding matters, including President Biden’s requests for nearly $40 billion in aid for Ukraine and $9 billion worth of COVID funding.

Here’s a sampling of what else the Democrats hope to get done in the next four weeks:

* **Protect same-sex marriage:** The Respect for Marriage Act would require states to recognize same-sex marriages as legal unions if the Supreme Court overturned same-sex marriage as a constitutional right in the future. The Senate is expected to pass the measure this week, sending it back to the House for a final vote.
* **Revise the Electoral Count Act:** This bill, which has the support of 40 senators (including 16 Republicans), would remove ambiguities from the Electoral Count Act that President Donald Trump tried to exploit to overturn the 2020 election results.
* **Raise the debt limit:** This one doesn’t have to be settled until next year, but Democrats want to address it before Republicans take control of the House so they can’t use it as a political weapon (For example, Republicans could use the debt limit as leverage for enacting spending cuts or making other policy demands.)
* **Confirm more of Biden’s judicial nominees:** This isn’t as urgent of a priority for Democrats as it would have been if the Republicans had won the Senate, but it’s still in the Democrats’ interest to confirm more judges before the year ends. (Nominees who aren’t confirmed would need to be renominated next year.)

**Eliminate Secret Political Campaign Funding, From stopdarkmoney.org**

The following is extracted from materials provided by stopdarkmoney.org, during their successful effort to eliminate anonymous political moneys in **Arizona** by passing Proposition 211 last month. The proposition passed, carrying 72.34% of the vote.

While we have no direct way of initiating a similar initiative in NC perhaps the facts below and strength of the overwhelming approval in a purple state may help convince the NCGA to follow suit. It is certainly worth the effort.

THERE ARE TWO KEY REASONS WHY THIS IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT:
1. **Credibility:** When we read the news, study data or even just talk to someone, we carefully consider the credibility of our source. Information from a source with an obvious bias is weighed in that context. For example, health advice from a doctor might be considered more credible than car buying advice from a car salesman. By understanding who the speaker or writer is, as well as what interest they have in persuading us, allows us to better understand why they are sending us a message and determine whether we should trust it. The decision is ours how to evaluate a source, but first we have to know who that source is. Dark Money hides the source and prevents voters from making an informed decision.
**2. Reputation:** We all know that when people are accountable for their words and actions they adhere to a higher standard of veracity. Negative political attacks based on false accusations are far less likely when an organization has to answer questions from supporters, opponents and the press about them. If the source is hidden, it is never held accountable.

Prop 211, a bipartisan initiative, aims to eliminate dark money in Arizona. Dark money is political spending on election advertising by **anonymous** sources. It is called “Dark Money” because we cannot see who is sponsoring the messages in political ads. Whereas Dark Money sources are hidden and the amounts they can spend are unlimited, ordinary citizens’ contributions to a candidate's campaign are capped and their names and addresses must be disclosed publicly. Under current Arizona law, a few dark money power brokers get special treatment, the rules that all the rest of us must follow don’t apply to them. These well-funded organizations and individuals exert a major influence in elections by spending money on advertisements and promotions supporting their candidate or ballot proposition. This “Dark Money” spending is frequently used to bombard the voters with negative ads, misleading information, and even outright lies. At Stop Dark Money, we are supporting a ballot initiative that, if placed on the 2022 ballot and passed by Arizona voters, would **require ALL major contributors to clearly identify themselves** if they invest more than $5,000 in support of a campaign or a candidate.

**Environmental Health**

# Understaffed environmental agency ‘stretched to the limit’

State government job vacancies were up more than 22 percent by this summer and a third of employees who have quit DEQ say salary was a factor in their decision.

Coastal Review Online By Trista Talton November 10, 2022

Nearly one-fifth of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality’s job positions are unfilled, leaving the agency responsible for administering regulations to protect water, air quality and the public’s health in a tight pinch that is not likely to loosen any time soon.

As of Oct. 25, 19.19 percent — 340 of 1,772 positions — in DEQ were vacant. That includes new, time-limited positions created to administer federal funding programs, according to information provided by a DEQ official.

DEQ’s staffing shortage is indicative of a broader issue in state government, where a number of departments are dealing with even steeper declines, putting the squeeze on state employees who are left to pick up the slack while typically making less than their professional counterparts in the private sector.

#### Tough competition

Compounding the loss of staff to higher-paying private sector jobs is the number of retirement-eligible staff within the department. Since Jan. 1, 53 DEQ employees have retired.

Another 14 percent of the department’s employees are eligible for retirement, DEQ Deputy Secretary for Public Affairs Sharon Martin said in an email responding to questions from Coastal Review. Within the next five years, 452 DEQ employees will be eligible for retirement.

“At DEQ’s current funding levels, many budgeted salaries are not competitive in the current job market, and engineers may be one of the clearest examples,” she said. “Among state agencies, DEQ has the second highest need for engineers behind only (Department of Transportation). However, market competition for engineers makes retention and recruitment particularly difficult.”

The average and median salary for a DEQ engineer 1 is about $15,000 less than the starting salary of a N.C. State University engineer graduate. An engineer II with more than 20 years’ experience is paid “roughly the equivalent” to a fresh-out-of-college N.C. State University engineer graduate.

Martin said DEQ is taking several steps to address staffing challenges, such as bumping up salaries for 88 employees whose pay was below the minimum under the state’s compensation system; targeting retention bonuses for engineer and environmental specialists; and evaluating a multi step, department-wide plan to narrow the public-private sector pay gap for staff who meet certain education and experience qualifications.

When real wages for state employees are not keeping up with the private sector and inflation, now at a 41-year high, that makes it incredibly difficult to retain “the kind of dedicated and talented and knowledgeable public servants that we rely upon to make modern life possible,” said Patrick McHugh, research manager at the N.C. Budget & Tax Center.

## Codify Abortion Rights - Passed House, Demand a Senate Vote

The Supreme Court has flouted 50 years of legal precedent and ruled to overturn Roe v. Wade, the landmark decision protecting abortion access for pregnant people at the federal level.

With the overturning of Roe v. Wade, states now have the authority to restrict abortion. Thirteen states already have “trigger laws” which take effect with the overturning of Roe v. Wade, making abortion illegal. Many other states have laws that restrict abortion, such as six week bans, which can now be freely implemented. Other states are expected to follow suit, with at least half of states expected to ban or severely restrict abortion access in the coming months.

Codifying abortion access through federal legislation is one of our last options to protect pregnant people. The House recently passed the Women’s Health Protection Act, H.R. 8296, which creates legal protections for both abortion providers and abortion care patients at the federal level. The bill safeguards access to abortion nationwide by preventing restrictions such as six-week bans, mandatory delay periods, biased anti-choice abortion counseling, and medically unnecessary ultrasounds.

**It is now time for the Senate to act.** The Senate does not have the 60 vote filibuster-proof threshold needed to pass H.R. 8296 under current Senate rules, but filibuster rules can easily be changed with a simple majority vote. The Democratic Senate majority must pass a filibuster exception to allow for a vote on abortion access. With this filibuster carve-out, H.R. 8296 can pass through the Senate and reach President Biden’s desk.

Nobody should face forced birth. The rights to privacy and bodily autonomy are fundamental in a free and fair society. Demand your